

Developing Community Partnerships in Child Welfare

Why are community partnerships important?

The lives and needs of families coming into the child welfare system today are complex and challenging. These families' needs cut across service areas and frequently include services for mental health and/or substance abuse issues, economic support, housing, and others. No one agency or set of services is adequate to restore families to a level of functioning that both ensures their children are safe in permanent homes and enhances the well-being of family members. While public child welfare agencies retain responsibility for child safety, they cannot succeed without all community stakeholders sharing responsibility and supporting these families.

Community partnerships help child welfare agencies respond to families by providing: supports to prevent child maltreatment or its reoccurrence; a range of informal and formal services that work together to share responsibility; and individualized responses to families' strengths and needs. Partnerships result in better outcomes for children and families.

Child welfare administrators and supervisors need to ensure that creating and sustaining community partnerships is a

regular part of the agency's agenda and practice. Workers need the knowledge, skills, and values to create concrete and productive partnerships between the child welfare team, families, community-based service providers (e.g., health, mental health, schools, housing, economic supports), and other community stakeholders (e.g., the faith and business communities, law enforcement and the courts, and neighborhood and civic organizations).

The National Child Welfare Resource Center for Organizational Improvement (NRCOI) defines the continuum and kinds of community partnerships in the graphic on the back of this page.

How do community partnerships develop?

Community linkages and partnerships develop over several years. Their results and capacity accumulate and move a jurisdiction from less sophisticated community linkages to more

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sophisticated community partnerships.

For example, if an agency has succeeded at making and using

effective referrals, their next step may focus on developing effective joint case planning with families, other providers, and family supports—perhaps through family conferencing. If the agency already does effective joint case planning, then it may begin work on joint program development.

How we can help?

The NRCOI helps states develop, maintain, and enhance community partnerships with a range of providers and stakeholders. We also have helped some states prepare for the Child and Family Services Reviews by better engaging community partners.

Our curriculum *Community Partnerships and Linkages: Reaching Out To Work Together* helps front-line workers and supervisors build community partnerships, effective referrals, and joint case planning with the family, other service providers, and the family's network. This curriculum has been used to train the trainers allowing the State to ensure

ongoing training in developing community partnerships.

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Other T/TA we can provide includes:

- We help jurisdictions share organizational infrastructure among public and private provider organizations. Strategies include written memoranda of agreement, joint management information systems, and staff liaisons and co-location.
- The NRCOI assists in creating, maintaining, and enhancing community collaboratives for child protection. In one state we helped create a community collaborative that combined the best in community-based child

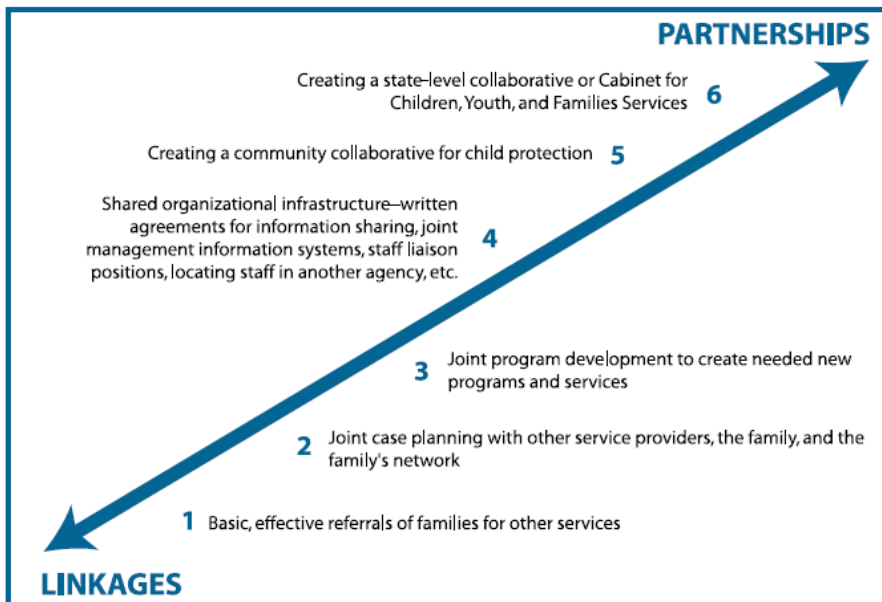
welfare reform with the best in managed-care technologies. Every significant community stakeholder group was engaged and involved in creating the collaborative to deflect children and families from coming into the child welfare system. The state then achieved state-negotiated safety and permanency outcomes at the 96–99 percentile level.

- We have used a “Patch” approach to community partnership and child protection that creates a practice- and results-driven change process accountability for well-being,

safety, and permanency. Named that builds community after a British system of neighborhood services, Patch’s key concept is that effective services must be locally adapted to support the best ways that families care for themselves in particular communities. The neighborhood-based team of public agency staff, family service and support providers, and community-based organizations is central to Patch practice. With community residents and stakeholders, team members work closely with service users and residents to define problems and create solutions that work at multiple levels of the system.

- We can also help create a state-level collaborative or cabinet for children, youth, and families. Local collaboration between different services improves and is facilitated when there is mandated collaboration between public agencies at the state director or deputy level.

For more information: Contact Steve Preister at the NRCOI, by phone (202-723-0320) or email (spreister@gmail.com).



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